

Involving the public in the search for rare plants at Point Reyes National Seashore

by Michelle Coppoletta

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POINT REYES NATIONAL SEASHORE HOSTS MORE than 900 species of flowering plants, representing approximately 16% of the plant species known to occur in California. Five plant species at Point Reyes appear on the federally endangered list, 21 are federal species of concern, and the California Native Plant Society lists an additional 24 plant species as rare. Since 1984, park staff and a devoted group of volunteers have monitored rare plant populations at Point Reyes. Before 2001, comprehensive information describing the abundance and distribution of many of these rare species did not exist. Recognizing the need for a rare plant inventory and faced with the daunting task of surveying more than 71,000 acres of potential habitat, resource managers created an event called the “Rare-Plant-A-Thon.” This event involves members of the local community, agency botanists, students, and plant enthusiasts from around the San Francisco Bay Area in the search for undocumented rare plant populations within the national seashore.

In 2002, park vegetation managers hosted two Rare-Plant-A-Thons. More than 100 volunteers participated in these weekend events, traveling from as far away as Sacramento, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Death Valley. The events drew a wide diversity of participants that included teachers, engineers, artists, students, and amateur and professional botanists. At the start of each event, volunteers received training that included a slide show of the seashore’s rare plant species and a discussion of where participants might expect to encounter them. Park staff and local botanists then led small groups of volunteers to different

areas within the seashore with instructions to survey and monitor rare plant species.

In addition to involving the public in the park’s management activities, Rare-Plant-A-Thon events have made a large contribution to the Point Reyes inventory effort as a whole. As a result of the 2002 events, 23 previously unrecorded rare plant populations were located, documented, and mapped. One of these new occurrences was the first documented population of a very recent addition to the seashore, the federally endangered robust spineflower (*Chorizanthe robusta*). Volunteers also monitored and mapped 18 known rare plant populations. One group helped transplant the federally endangered wetland grass Sonoma alopecurus (*Alopecurus aequalis* var. *sonomensis*) into the wild as part of a reintroduction project.

Whether participants were experienced botanists seeking opportunities to photograph endangered species or individuals who simply wanted to learn more about California’s coastal wildflowers, the response was universal. Volunteers couldn’t wait to come back for more. These events have generated such excitement and interest from participants that the Rare-Plant-A-Thon has now become one of the seashore’s annual events. A resource management success story, the Rare-Plant-A-Thon increases local awareness and inspires enthusiasm for the abundance and diversity of rare plant species in Point Reyes. ■

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A Rare-Plant-A-Thon volunteer climbs a hillside above Tomales Bay in Point Reyes National Seashore in search of coast rock cress (*Arabis blepharophylla*) and other rare plants. During two weekends in 2002, more than 100 volunteers surveyed the park, documenting 23 previously unrecorded rare plant populations and taking part in related restoration activities.



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